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THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATIVENESS OF THE VOLUNTEER ARMY

David R. Segal
and
Bernard L. Daina



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6

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VOLUNTEER ARMY

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David R./Segal

Bernard L./Daina



Submitted by:
David R. Segal, Chief
Social Processes Technical Area

11

Dec 1975

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Approved by:

E. Ralph Dusek, Director
Individual Training and Performance
Research Laboratory

J. E. Uhlaner, Technical Director
U.S. Army Research Institute for
the Behavioral and Social Sciences

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THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATIVENESS OF THE VOLUNTEER ARMY

One of the major criticisms of the military conscription system in America in the 1960's was that rather than distributing the burden of defending the nation broadly through American society, the draft placed the burdens of war disproportionately upon the shoulders of disadvantaged strata of society: the poor and the black (Davis and Dolbeare, 1968). Interestingly, the same charge has been levied at the all-volunteer force that replaced the draft-era Army (Janowitz, 1973). With hindsight, it appears that the socioeconomic skewness of the draft Army was overemphasized by many (Segal, 1975). Nonetheless, the Army has set as a goal the recruitment of a broadly representative military establishment (Secretary of the Army, 1974), and sociologists have pointed out that variations from representativeness of some as yet undetermined magnitude may threaten the social legitimacy of the military institution (Janowitz, 1975).

↓ This memorandum summarizes a comparison of the social background of volunteer soldiers, derived from the Army Quarterly Survey of November 1974, with characteristics of the population of eligible military age derived from U.S. census documents. This comparison will serve as an indication of the degree to which the volunteer Army is indeed socially representative of the society which it defends.

↖ The November 1974 Army Quarterly Survey was administered to a 5% random sample of the enlisted personnel of the Army, worldwide. Approximately 5,300 questionnaires were returned, and the survey has a reported reliability of 95% ± 5% (U.S. Army Military Personnel Center, 1975). Since our concern is with the volunteer force and since the pre-1973 pool of volunteers is contaminated by personnel who were influenced to enlist by the existence of the military draft, we confine our analysis to personnel in grades E1-E3. The median time in service for personnel in these grades was .4 years, .8 years, and 1.4 years, respectively. Of the respondents in these grades, 75% had been in the Army one year or less and 90% had been in the Army two years or less. Among E4s, by contrast, more than 25% had been in the Army more than 2 years in November 1974, indicating the presence of considerable numbers who entered the Army prior to the formal conversion to an all-volunteer force.

Ninety-three percent of our E1-E3 respondents fell into the 17-24 year age group, thus defining the relevant age-eligible civilian population for comparison. Civilian data were derived from reports of the 1970 decennial census (from which figures for recent years were adjusted by use of vital statistics) and/or from estimates of the population from the monthly Current Population Survey (CPS) of 47,000 eligible households published by the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

RESULTS

RACE

The racial composition of the force has been the focus of much of the sociological concern with representativeness (Janowitz and Moskos, 1974). As Table 1 shows, black personnel were considerably overrepresented in the Army. However, where critics of the Army have projected increasing concentrations of black personnel, Army trend data indicate a leveling in FY 75, and indeed suggest that blacks are somewhat overrepresented in the 1974 survey (Segal, in preparation).

Table 1

MALE AND FEMALE ARMY VOLUNTEERS AND AGE-ELIGIBLE NON-INSTITUTIONALIZED RESIDENT CIVILIAN POPULATION COMPARED BY RACE, 1974

	Army E1-E3	Civilian 17-24 years old ^a
White	63.85%	85.97%
Black	26.49%	12.37%
Other	9.66%	1.65%
Total	100% (n = 1713)	99.9% (n = 29,859,000)

^a From CPS Report P-25, no. 529, September 1974, Table 3.

MARITAL STATUS

Despite trends toward increased marriage rates in the Army enlisted force, our sample contained more unmarried males than did the comparable civilian sample (Segal et al., in press). Slightly more than 28% of our Army E1-E3 sample was married, as compared to slightly more than 32% of the 1974 resident U.S. 18-24 year old male population (excluding military in barracks and institutionalized civilians) (CPS Report P-20, October 1974, Table 1). While the 4% difference is statistically significant due to the large numbers involved, we do not have a great divergence here between a bachelor combat force and the civilian population. And since dependents' benefits for military personnel increase markedly at grade E5, there is no reason to believe that even this small difference is maintained throughout the Army.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

As Table 2 shows, the volunteer Army draws disproportionately from the lower educational strata in manning the lower enlisted grades. There is an 11% overrepresentation of non-high school graduates. However, the broad spectrum of educational attainment is represented, although not proportionally, with the 15% of the enlisted sample who have some college education. Note that if new officer accessions from the upper end of this age group were included in these data, the civilian-military education differential would likely be considerably smaller.

Table 2

MALE ARMY VOLUNTEERS AND AGE-ELIGIBLE RESIDENT NON-
INSTITUTIONALIZED POPULATION COMPARED BY EDUCATION, 1974

	Army E1-E3	Civilian 18-24 years old ^a
Less than high school	32.2%	23.3%
High school	52.7%	42.2%
Some college	13.4%	27.4%
College degree	<u>1.7%</u>	<u>7.1%</u>
Total	100% (n = 1639)	100% (n = 12,422,000)

^a From CPS Report P-20, no. 274, December 1974, Table 1.

FAMILY INCOME

A supplementary Army survey conducted in February 1975 collected data on the yearly income, at the time the respondents entered the Army, of the families in which the respondents had grown up. Table 3 compares the income distributions for these families to the income distributions among all U.S. families for the same modal years (E1 vs 1974; E2 vs 1973-74; E3 vs 1972-73). In all years for all grades, the family median income for E1-E3s falls one category below the national family median income. Thus, the enlisted force seems to be recruited disproportionately from lower income strata of the population. Note, however, that the upper strata are merely underrepresented, not unrepresented.

Table 3

COMPARISON OF ANNUAL INCOME OF FAMILIES OF ARMY VOLUNTEERS AT
TIME OF ENLISTMENT AND OF ALL U.S. FAMILIES IN THE SAME PERIODS

	% of Families in Each Annual Income Category				Total
	\$4,999 or less	\$5,000-\$9,999	\$10,000-\$14,999	\$15,000 or more	
E1 vs US 1974 ^a	22.6 13.1	31.7 22.7	26.3 24.3	19.4 39.8	100 % 99.9%
E2 vs US 1973/74 ^b	23.8 13.9	32.4 23.5	24.3 24.9	19.5 37.7	100 % 100 %
E3 vs US 1972/73 ^c	22.4 15.6	29.4 25.6	27.0 25.8	21.2 32.9	100 % 99.9%

^a From CPS Report P-60, no. 99, July 1975, Table 3.

^b Mean computed from CPS Report P-60, no. 99, July 1975, Table 3, and CPS Report P-60, no. 97, January 1975, Table 27.

^c Mean computed from CPS Report P-60, no. 97, January 1975, Table 27, and CPS Report P-60, no. 90, December 1973, Table 21.

SIZE OF COMMUNITY

Of the Army personnel in grades E1-E3, 53.33% grew up in communities larger than 25,000 people. By contrast, 73.19% of the 13-20 year age group in the 1970 decennial census grew up in such communities (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1973). Obviously, the traditionally rural recruitment base of the Army is being maintained. Since median family income is lower in rural areas, this factor contributes to the income differential between military and civilian populations.

DISCUSSION

Scholarly discourse on the social representativeness of the volunteer Army has focused on enlisted accessions. Given the likelihood that attrition among new accessions will be related to social background characteristics rather than random, we have focused on personnel in grades E1-E3 as a better reflection of the social composition of the force than new accessions would be. At the same time, focusing only on the enlisted force builds a bias into any comparison with the civilian population, since officers in

the volunteer Army tend to differ from enlisted personnel. Inclusion of newly accessioned officers would decrease the civilian-military differentials observed.

While there are statistically significant differences between the social background characteristics of volunteer Army personnel and the civilian age-eligible population, these differences in many instances are small, and their significance is a function of the large case bases involved. The only practical major difference is racial distribution, which in turn impacts on the income and education differential, since these attributes have been found to be related to race.

A further question is the degree to which the social backgrounds of personnel in the volunteer Army differ from the backgrounds of men who served during the period of military conscription. Data collected by the RAND Corporation suggest that there has been little change in the regional composition of enlisted accessions or in the economic background of personnel (Cooper, 1975). The volunteer force has a higher proportion of black personnel than the pre-volunteer force did, but given the high rate of unemployment in the United States in recent months, which particularly affects the black segment of the population, the representation of blacks in the Army might well have increased considerably even without the ending of the draft.

In brief, the broad range of social strata in American society seems to be represented in the military, although not proportionally. Most differences between military and civilian populations are relatively small, although the overrepresentation of blacks is considerable and may account for some of the education and income differentials. Inclusion of officers in the military population would reduce the differential.

The social composition of the volunteer Army is not very different from the composition of the pre-volunteer Army, again with the exception of race. The overrepresentation of blacks in the Army leveled off in FY 75, however, and in any case might have reached its current level even in a conscription situation because of national economic circumstances.

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